Call for inputs for a report on older persons in the context of climate change-induced disasters and building back better

PATISKA Platform - Older Women and Technologies

Dr. Selma Acuner - President

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The inputs provided by the Patiska Platform[[1]](#footnote-1) are primarily based on the intensive mitigation activities carried out by women's organizations and civil society in response to the devastating earthquake that struck Türkiye on February 6th, 2023. Therefore, the information we present below is derived directly from fieldwork and firsthand experience.

The inputs are prepared in cooperation with Women's Coalition-Türkiye (WCT)[[2]](#footnote-2), of which Patiska Platform is a member of.

**Introduction:**

On 6th of February, Turkiye and Syria was struck by two successive earthquakes measuring 7.7 and 7.6 magnitude, resulting in the loss of tens of thousands of people.

The fate of many people including older people remains unknown, making it difficult to express their loss as mere numbers. Many older people are trying to survive under extremely difficult conditions, and they are open to all kinds of abuse.

Women and girls make up half of the population of the affected 11 provinces. 54% of the population over 60 years old are women, and 8% of the 3.5 million households are female-headed with at least one child. Prior to the earthquakes, an estimated 7.9 percent of females and 5.9 per cent of males in Türkiye were living with disabilities.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, this figure rose significantly in the aftermath of the disaster but no reliable data is available yet.

Türkiye hosts the largest refugee population in the world, around 1.74 million refugees live in the 11 provinces impacted by the earthquakes approximately half of which are women and girls.

**Establishment of a Disaster Coordination Network:** Knowing that disasters tend to disproportionately affect women and knowing that there is a real risk of deepening of the pre-existing inequalities, Women's Coalition -Türkiye, of which Patiska Platform is a member of, mobilized rapidly and brought together around 150 of its member organizations to aid in the recovery efforts to remedy this indescribable chaos. Through the establishment of a Disaster Coordination Network (DCN), WCT-DCN collaborated with volunteers and its member organizations to address the devastation caused by the earthquake. WCT-DCN aims to build a bridge between resources and those in need and to ensure that women's organizations and women of all ages take an active part in every stage of disaster management.

**Focus on Women, Children, Older Women and People and LGBTI+s:** Based on the long years of experience that women, children, older people and specifically older women, LGBTI+s, and other groups living in unequal conditions will be the most affected by the multi-layered adversities experienced, WCT -DCN focuses its efforts on ensuring that these groups were not left behind in the relief efforts. We aim to fight against rights violations and ensure that the needs and rights of these groups were prioritized in the relief and recovery efforts.

**DATA:** As women, we witnessed the power of women's movement and civil society once again. Through the solidarity network we established, that extended from the local to the international level, we were able to access reliable data much earlier than state institutions, allowing us to take swift and effective action. Indeed very limited disaggregated official data is available on the response to climate change-related disasters in Turkey, in particular with regard to older persons and older women

**Active involvement in every stage of disaster management:** WCT aims to ensure that women's organizations take an active part in every stage of disaster management. This includes not only the relief efforts but also the planning and implementation of long-term recovery and reconstruction efforts. By ensuring the active involvement of women's organizations, we aim to ensure that the needs and rights of women of all ages, children, and LGBTI+s are not overlooked.

In summary, the WCT played an important role in the relief and recovery efforts following the earthquakes in Kahramanmaraş province. Our focus on women, children, older women and LGBTI+s ensured that these groups were not left behind in the relief efforts, and their active involvement in every stage of disaster management ensured that the needs and rights of these groups were prioritized in the recovery and reconstruction efforts.

To achieve our goals, the WCT-DCN created **two main working groups -** **operations and advocacy** - which focused on fieldwork. We developed two work plans, one for immediate response and one for the long term, and began working as volunteers for women's organizations starting from the second day after the earthquake. We established **focal points in each of the 10 provinces directly affected by the earthquake and formed field teams of approximately 40 people in each province**. Our operations group created a work plan based on the information gathered by these teams. We conducted a mapping study for each province, identifying which institutions and organizations were providing aid, what was needed in the field, and any violations of rights. **During the first stage**, the focus was on identifying needs rather than rights violations. Therefore, we conducted a study to address this gap. In the chaotic environment, we worked tirelessly to gather and verify information on needs and support, which could only be achieved through our organization's efforts on the ground.

Additionally, we implemented support programs that considered the **secondary traumas** experienced by women who actively participated in this process

Especially during the most critical first 3 days, there was a significant deficit in reaching the lives waiting to be rescued from under the rubble and meeting the vital needs of survivors, due to the failure of the government to organize and mobilize search and rescue teams. Many people who could be rescued and those who were not able to move without aid due to their older age and disabilities, froze to death calling for help under the debris.

So, the initial priority of the operations group was to rescue those trapped under the rubble, often with hands due to very limited resources and tools. For those, including older women, who survived outside the rubble, life was incredibly challenging as they struggled to obtain necessities such as clean water, shelter, food, and heating. These needs continued to expand to include access to hygiene, safe spaces, and protection.

The lack of access to these basic rights disproportionately affected women, older women, and children. Women of all ages are left without a way out against the risk of violence and their hygiene needs are grossly overlooked by the state. Caregiving and chores were left on women's shoulders.

While open toilets and open space was suitable for men, they posed a significant challenge to women who struggled to find sanitary pads and suitable locations to change them. The fact that young women (and older women that use pads due to their urination problems), could not go and ask for pads, even if they were distributed after a while, due to traditional roles and cultural structure. This problem **could only be solved when women's organisations entered the field.** The general lack of hygiene, inadequate lighting, and the absence of private spaces also made women vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault.

As additional needs emerged in the following days, **we expanded our working area to include provinces where earthquake victims had migrated**. We formed teams to address the needs of those provinces, and we regularly updated our support services guides, which contained confirmed information about addresses where people in the affected provinces could access aid. **We shared this information** with the public through online platforms, mukhtars' offices, and municipalities. At the same time, we provided support to people who had lost their homes in the earthquake by working with local governments and our partner organizations to provide shelter, furniture, employment opportunities, food products, and educational scholarships.

**As the advocacy group** of the WCT-DCN, we aimed to remind the government and all political structures of their obligations to mobilize the public administration, to raise awareness of rights violations and needs, and to create local, national, and international pressure for effective action. We called for solidarity with national and international public opinion, emphasizing that those responsible for the destruction caused by the earthquake cannot be relied upon to remove the wreckage. We criticized the declaration of a state of emergency and the desire to carry out the process without questioning or participation, when all public and civilian means should have been mobilized.

Since the earthquake, we have systematically expanded our network and cooperated with a variety of organizations, including women's organizations, those focusing on older women, rights organizations, professional chambers, political parties, municipalities, the private sector, universities, media organizations, and international organizations. We received support for providing clean water supply and hygiene kits, including sanitary pads, nail clippers, underwear, soap, and other items to women and girls in the region, where there are problems accessing clean water. We will distribute 30,000 hygiene kits over six months, with 25,000 kits distributed in the first month and 25,000 in the following months, and we are working to extend the distribution period to two years.

Today, after more than 2 months has passed since the first earthquake, access to basic needs such as tents, water, shelter, and food remains an urgent issue in the earthquake-stricken zone.

We therefore, are also preparing concrete proposals, information materials, and guidelines to increase the inclusiveness of existing public services.

**Women's Life Centers:** Each day presents new challenges and compounding effects of the catastrophe. We are working to address rights violations, including the escalating threat of harassment, rape, and racist attacks against refugees. While addressing immediate needs, we are also creating a long-term strategy to mobilize the collaborations we have established. As part of this strategy, we are initiating efforts to establish "Women's Life Centers," that will also serve older women, in collaboration with municipalities and the private sector in disaster-stricken provinces. The aim of these centers is to create safe spaces for earthquake-affected women, children, older women and marginalized groups to socialize, learn about their rights, receive relevant referrals, and access basic facilities such as laundry, bathroom, kitchen, and playrooms. Additionally, the centers will provide psycho-social support and facilitate group work, making **it a new model** that addresses the long-term need for empowerment spaces for women and girls beyond the existing women's counseling centers implemented by local governments. As Women's Coalition, we hold the main culprits of the earthquake devastation accountable and present sustainable solutions to these challenges.

**International Campaigns:** Additionally, we have organized bazaars in London, Florence, and Berlin to support improving the conditions of those who continue to live in their homes in the earthquake zone.

**Difficulties:**

"While civil society organizations were struggling to provide support, the state hampered their efforts for rescue and remedy by declaring a State of Emergency, they attempted to carry out the process from a single hand by closing the doors to participation and by criminalizing social solidarity.

We used social media effectively for rescue and needs communication with all actors including municipalities. Unfortunately, the government's restriction on the internet in the week after the earthquake also hampered civil solidarity and rescue efforts by blocking access to social media. This was against **accessible and inclusive digital rights.**

**Monitoring and Reconstruction process:** In addition to the aforementioned practices, we also have a long-term plan to monitor the reconstruction and rebuilding of the entire region. We cannot allow those responsible for turning this natural disaster into a catastrophe to repeat their mistakes. Therefore, we demand that the needs of the groups who have been excluded from decision-making processes so far, and who have been most negatively affected by these decisions, be at the forefront of the reconstruction process.

We call on the international community to stand in solidarity with us in ensuring that equality and participatory processes are central to Turkey's reconstruction efforts, and that all support mechanisms are structured to ensure this. We believe it is important to address the following issues in the steps to be taken:

* The reconstruction process should be carried out locally, not centrally, and guarantee the participation of rights organizations. It should be inclusive and responsive to different needs, while also ensuring safe spaces for everyone.
* The process should focus on a holistic physical and social program that addresses all groups in unequal conditions, with special attention given to women and girls and without discrimination.
* The development program should allow the resources to be used directly by women's organizations and local initiatives in the region, in line with their own needs.
* The process should be monitored and transparent by local civil initiatives.

By following these steps, we can ensure that the reconstruction process is carried out fairly, transparently, and with the participation of all those affected by the disaster.

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1. The Patiska Platform is a nonprofit organization that aims to enhance the rights of older women and to specifically bridge the digital divide for older women by providing them with the skills and knowledge necessary to confidently use technology in their daily lives. The organization's mission is to ensure that older women are not excluded from the benefits of technological advancements, which can often lead to isolation and disempowerment. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Women's Coalition - Türkiye (Kadin Koalisyonu) is a country-wide women's NGO, comprising of women and women's groups of all ages who have been advocating for equality, freedom, and justice in Turkey since 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/UN%20Women%20Brief%20on%20Earthquake%20in%20Turkiye%20Gendered%20impacts%20and%20response\_0.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)